

**Testimony in Support of House Bill 4478
State of Michigan House of Representatives
Criminal Justice Committee
May 19, 2015**

Chairman Heise and Members of the Criminal Justice Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in strong support of House Bill 4478. My name is Alana Kivowitz. I recently completed my first year in a two-year master's program at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. During the school year, I interned at the University's Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center where I offered emotional support and advocacy to survivors of sexual assault. Prior to this internship, I also worked as a crisis counselor at Lifeline, the national suicide prevention organization. Please note that my remarks this morning are my own and do not represent the University of Michigan or Lifeline.

Mr. Chairman, I have had firsthand experience involving clients and their pets in high risk crisis situations within domestic settings. During my role in these capacities, I was exposed to the realities of assault situations involving pets and the barriers that current PPO policies create for survivors of domestic violence. I care very deeply about empowering survivors to prioritize the safety of themselves and their loved ones, and **I believe that it is vital to include animals in PPOs, not only for the safety of the animals, but to empower survivors as well.**

I'd like to share a story with you from my time as a crisis counselor. Over the course of a year, I spoke with one client many times about the physical and emotional abuse she was experiencing at home from her husband. During our calls, she'd describe her relationship with her golden retriever, and indicated that if not for her dog, she had little motivation each day. When she'd express feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and suicide ideation, she would often light up when I asked about her dog. She consistently indicated that caring for her dog was her primary coping mechanism when experiencing abuse, depressive episodes, or having thoughts of suicide. It dramatically increased her mood, grounding her during episodes of dissociation, and helping her to feel empowered by caring for another life. She mentioned that she had grown socially isolated from friends and family members during the course of her relationship with her husband, and that her pet was her primary support when her husband was violent.

The more my client stood up for herself, the more her husband would abuse their dog as a manipulation tactic. It got to the point that even though my client knew she had to leave her home, she feared that her dog would suffer horribly if she chose to report her husband's abuse. She was not willing to leave her dog behind to be abused, and no shelters in the area were able to accommodate her dog. Eventually, my client packed a suitcase, took the dog, and spent over a month living out of her car.

This anecdote is just one of many that demonstrates the current barriers for survivors of domestic violence. According to the American Humane Association, there's a significant correlation between those who witness animal abuse and those who experience assault, and animal abuse is often indicated as a precursor of violence in perpetrators of assault. **Specifically, close to 85% of women who were surveyed at shelters reported incidents of animal abuse by their abuser. However, only 3% of shelters currently accept animals alongside survivors.** Unfortunately, this creates a dramatic barrier for individuals seeking sanctuary from interpersonal violence, as many survivors refuse to separate from their pet, in part due to the therapeutic value of the human-animal bond, and in part due to fear that the animal will be abused in their absence. The statistics become more astounding once we speculate how many survivors are staying in these dangerous situations due to the limitations with current PPOs.

Mr. Chairman, given the value of the human-pet connection, it is no surprise to me that many of my clients hesitated when discussing the options available to them to separate from an abusive household. Despite the fact that many of these clients were encouraged to seek safety in a shelter, or take the necessary steps to get a PPO, most pet owners were unwilling to leave their pets even if it ensured their own safety. Clients consistently expressed feelings of fear and guilt, and for many of these clients, they felt it necessary to stay in these settings simply to protect their pet from being abused in their absence. It's heartbreaking to reflect back on these clients, many of whom are still in life-threatening situations because their pets are not allotted the same protection.

I wholeheartedly believe that passing House Bill 4478 to include animals in PPOs will help to remove an important barrier for survivors of interpersonal violence, while protecting both animals and humans in violent situations.

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